

MANUSCRIPTS  
THE CATCH

Cleò Sumner

Liz stretched out on the chaise lounge languidly and eyed herself appreciatively in the long mirror. Not bad, not bad at all for a thirty-eight year old, she mused. She could easily pass for twenty-five and she knew plenty of women at twenty-five who did not look half as good as she. Thank God her bust and thighs had stayed firm after the birth of her daughter. Melissa was such a dear, hardly any problem at all. She never dreamed it would be so easy to rear a child. She was such a shy child that she scarcely knew she was around. Liz wished that she had a little more spunk to her, more like the Millers' daughter.

Robert—Liz called him Robert after he was made vice-president of the Edsel Company—was now able to provide well for them after all of her hard work prodding him through the university and pushing him ahead in the company. A wife had to keep on her toes if she wanted her husband to succeed. She had to know the right people to cultivate, the right social functions to attend and the right clubs to join. It had been hard but, Liz crinkled her nose at herself in the mirror, she had succeeded beyond her wildest imagination.

She heard the door chimes and Suzette rushing to answer it. Suzette was the final touch of elegance that Robert had allowed her. The girl's name had been Susie, but Suzette sounded so much more sophisticated and the girl seemed to like it after a little persuasion.

"Where's mother?" Liz heard Melissa's voice inquiring.

"Here I am. Upstairs, darling," Liz looked at her watch. Three thirty. Was it that late already.

"Mother, guess what? Tom asked me for a date tonight," Melissa said breathlessly, her face flushed with excitement.

What an adorable child, Liz thought. She looked so well in her clothes, but then why shouldn't she. She was a chip off the old block except Liz was a little more aggressive.

"Tom? Tom who, dear?"

"You know. I told you all about him last week. The boy who helped me on my science project."

"Oh, that boy. Melissa, dear, I don't want to interfere in your affairs, but couldn't you find a nice boy from this neighborhood to be interested in? Like Richard Fischer. He comes from such a nice family. After all, we don't know who this Tom person is or anything about him."

"I told you all about him, mother. Besides Richard doesn't even notice me when I'm around."

"I'll speak to his mother tonight while Father and I are there for dinner and see what I can do for my little cutie pie. Oh dear, I must run. I'm already late for my tennis date. We'll discuss this later, Melissa." Liz dismissed the whole incident from her mind as she was busy appraising herself in the white outfit she had chosen to wear. It was a little daring and showed off her tan beautifully. She must talk to Robert again about their Bermuda trip. She would need a whole new wardrobe as the Fitzsimmons were going to be there at the same time.

Melissa went to her room and sat at her desk idly. She loved her mother very much and knew her mother loved her. She was just too busy, she guessed. After all, look at all they had given her. Everything she wanted—her own bedroom and sitting room with her own television and stereo set with all the latest records, beautiful clothes, trips all over the world with class sponsors. What other girl was so lucky?

Yet there was an emptiness inside her that seemed to be crying out for something that she could not grasp. What an ungrateful child she was, she thought. Her parents had worked hard and now they gave her everything she desired and more. How could she go against her mother's wishes? Automatically she picked up the gold French phone and dialed.

"Tom? Melissa. I-I can't go. My mother made other plans for me. I—I'm sorry. Maybe some other time," her voice quaked.

"Yeah," Tom answered. "Okay."

Melissa knew her mother would not be back before six. She picked up one of the current magazines and thumbed through it. How dull it was. She put the stereo on but that did not appeal to her today. She walked down to the kitchen thinking to visit with Suzette until dinner but Melissa could tell by the giggling and one-sided conversation that Suzette was talking to her boy friend on the phone. There was nothing left to do but watch the reruns on television. She had seen them all a thousand times before during her sixteen years of life. She well

remembered the evenings spent after school when she came home to an empty apartment. The blare of the television had been a comfort then and helped ease the fear of being alone. At first she had hidden under the table—the one with the flowered cloth that reached to the floor—so that no intruder could find her.

“A big ten year old girl acting like a baby,” her mother had shamed her when she had caught her hiding there one day when she had left work early.

“I was afraid someone would break in and rob us.”

“Who’d want to? We have nothing here they’d have. That’s why mother has to work—to help Daddy.” She pulled Melissa down on her lap and in a softer dreamy voice went on. “Some day we’ll have a nice big house and maybe a nice big swimming pool for you and your friends to enjoy. Then mother can stay home with you and not have to work anymore.”

“I want you to stay home with me now.”

“Melissa, you’re being impossible. If you’d stop watching all those horror movies you wouldn’t be so afraid. I’m going to turn off that TV if it scares you so.”

After that Melissa had quashed her fears and sat in the middle of the davenport with the television blaring to drown out any strange noises.

Time dragged for Melissa. Finally her mother came racing in at the same time her father drove up. Melissa rushed down to greet them, glad for a little diversion from her boring day.

“Oh, how’s my little girl today?” her father asked.

“Oh, bored,” Melissa answered.

“That’s good, that’s good,” Mr. Brown absentmindedly said without glancing up from the Wall Street Journal. “Liz did you forget we’re going to the Fischers tonight for dinner? We have to be there at eight sharp.” If he could land that Fischer’s account he would have it made. Things did not look too promising. He wished he had a little more time to work on it.

“No, dear. I did not forget. I’ll be ready.” Then, catching a glimpse of Melissa’s face, Liz asked, “How was your day, dear? You really should get out more. Why don’t you ask some of your friends over for a swim in the pool? Suzette could make some nice pizzas for you.”

“Oh, mother, everyone would have other plans made by now.”

“Maybe you could call Carla and go to a nice show someplace.”

“Carla has a date.”



"Oh really, dear. I didn't think anyone would ask her. Well, do what you want. I must get ready."

"Mother."

"Yes, dear."

"About Tom."

"Yes."

"I—I called him and broke my date with him."

"That's my love. We'll find someone nice for you."

"Tom is nice," Melissa feebly defended him.

"I know, I know, Melissa. We'll talk about it tomorrow. I have to get ready now. You know how your father hates being late—especially to the Fischers."

"I know, Mother. Are you—are you going to talk to Mrs. Fischer—about Richard, I mean."

"Melissa, your mother told you she'd talk to you about it tomorrow," Mr. Brown cut in. "Why can't you obey?"

"I try to, daddy, but—"

"No argument now. Just do as your mother says." What was the matter with that child. She was so spoiled she did not know what she wanted. Every time they were getting ready to go somewhere she had to upset her mother.

Melissa turned to go to her room. She thought her mother would surely be pleased about her breaking her date with Tom but she scarcely heard. Why couldn't she please her parents? What was wrong with her? She tried so hard to do what they wanted. Tom had been like a God-send. He was shy like her. They understood each other and had so much to talk about. Melissa could not see what his parents' name had to do with it. Richard's parents were nice too, just like her parents, only their house was much larger and more beautiful. She really did not feel at ease with Richard like she did with Tom. Richard defied the teachers and got by with it because his father was so rich and influential. Mr. Fischer seemed to take pride in Richard's wild escapades.

"My boy wrecked another car," he'd boast. "Makes his sixth. Don't know what I'm going to do with him. Good thing he's got a rich father."

Richard was known to have the biggest and wildest parties of any one in school.

"Better keep the boy at home. Then I know who he's with," his father had stated. "I just keep the refrigerator stocked and then he

doesn't have to go hang around all those joints and get into trouble." Mr. and Mrs. Brown had agreed with him one hundred percent.

Liz had hoped Richard would be attracted to Melissa, but Richard seemed to like the more daring girls. Melissa would just have to loosen up a little and dress less sedately to attract his attention. If she could latch onto Richard, she would have it made. So what if Richard was a little wild. All boys had to sow their wild oats before they settled down. It was about time Melissa grew up and quit acting like a child.

Melissa's mother and father returned home from the Fischers about two thirty. Liz was so excited she rushed into Melissa's room to tell the good news. Melissa, still in her clothes, had fallen asleep in front of the television. How innocent she looks, Liz thought, how sweet and innocent. She'll be thrilled when I tell her. She gently shook her shoulders. "Melissa, honey, wake up. Mother has some good news for you. Wake up, dear. Do you hear me?" Melissa nodded her head, her eyes still dazed from the sound sleep of the young.

"Are you sure you're awake, dear? Mother wants to be sure you hear the wonderful news."

"Yes, mother."

"You're invited to Richard's birthday party tomorrow night at ten."

"What! You mean Richard invited me?"

"Yes. His mother asked if it'd be all right with him and he said yes, he'd love to have you. Isn't that wonderful, dear? And you thought he never noticed you," her mother teased. "Now to bed with you. Tomorrow mother will take you shopping for a new outfit. We'll have Andre style your hair. We'll make a little vamp out of you. Richard'll have to sit up and take notice. Here, put on your little nitey and off to bed with you. We've got a full day ahead of us. Sweet dreams, love," Liz murmured as she tucked Melissa into bed and kissed her softly on the cheek.

Wonder why he waited so late to ask me? Melissa thought as she drifted off to sleep.

By ten the next morning, Melissa and her mother had had breakfast and were on their way to shop. Andre had agreed to style Melissa's hair, after Liz had offered him double his price, at seven that evening. That would give Melissa all day to shop and a couple of hours to relax before the party. She knew just where to go to find the right dress for Melissa—the Crystal Room at Sarde's. If they did not have the right

dress, no one would; and you would not have to worry about seeing a duplicate of their gowns as they carried only originals. Besides, any one who was any one shopped there.

Liz wished that she had known sooner that Melissa would be invited to the party—after all, the invitations had gone out two weeks ago, but no use to dwell on that. This would be Melissa's first big grown-up affair and Liz wanted to make sure it would be a success. Mr. Kaizer, the couturier who always helped Liz, had just the gown for Melissa. He brought out a stunning yellow chiffon dress with a fitted bodice that plunged to a deep V in front dropping below the waist in back, accenting the soft fullness of the double skirt. Liz caught her breath. It was so beautiful.

"Does mademoiselle wish to try it," Mr. Kaizer needlessly asked Melissa.

"Oh, yes," she said.

When Liz saw Melissa in the dress, she could hardly believe the transformation that had taken place. As Melissa walked toward her, Liz felt a little twinge of jealousy. She was absolutely stunning. Mr. Kaizer knew exactly what accessories would offset the dress and the girl. The slippers he had chosen for Melissa were the exact luscious yellow and in his excellent infallible taste he had picked out dazzling diamond drop earrings set in gold to both offset and attract the eye to the bareness of the dress. The many hours that Melissa had whiled away in the swimming pool had really paid off in that firm tanned athletic body clearly defined by the soft clinging gown.

Melissa glowed in her mother's overwhelming approval. Never had she seen her mother so pleased, even when she had won the science award at school. One of her biggest disappointments had been when neither her mother nor her father could come to the presentation as it had been scheduled on the same night that the Humane Society had its ball, the biggest social events of the year.

"Do you think it's too—well, too bare, mother?" Melissa asked. She knew her mother would say no before she asked. "No, dear. It's perfect. Mr. Kaizer, you're a genius."

"Thank you, madame," Mr. Kaizer beamed. "I had a beautiful model to work with."

Melissa was further enhanced by Andre's magic. If Richard did not notice her tonight, he never would, Liz thought, but she need not have worried.



Richard completely forgot Elaine, his date for the evening, the moment Melissa walked in. All his attention was focused upon Melissa.

"See Richard's found him another playmate," Jan snidely remarked to Elaine in the ladies' lounge.

"That sweet innocent. She'll never last. He'll come crawling back to me," Elaine sneered into her drink.

Richard blitzed Melissa with attention. No one, but no one had ever treated Melissa so majestically. How glad Melissa was that she had listened to her mother. Tom seemed dull in comparison to Richard.

Richard began picking up Melissa before and after school. They were together morning, noon and night. It was nice having him right in the neighborhood too. Her mother and father were so pleased. They trusted Richard like a son. He kept Melissa company when her folks were gone. The dull, lonely nights watching television alone or talking to Suzette in the kitchen were a dimly remembered past.

Only one thing bothered Melissa. Richard was a bit, well, a bit too forward. Melissa had tried to discuss this with her mother but her mother told her, "You can't blame a boy for trying, dear. Don't be so prudish. Just be careful." The next morning, Melissa was surprised to find some birth control pills on her dressing table.

"Mother," she asked, "did you leave these on my dressing table? Liz glanced at the pills in Melissa's hand.

"Yes," she answered. Melissa gasped. Surely she did not think—

"Just don't bring me home any babies," her mother said.

Melissa's growing conviction was true then. She sensed that anything she did was all right so long as it was with Richard. Both families had contrived to throw them constantly together, not that Melissa minded being with Richard for she loved him completely, but somehow she had thought—well, that some things were sacred and that her parents had thought so too. She felt sad and dejected, a little less loved, like being deserted on an island by herself. Were her parents pacifying her with Richard so she would not interfere in their lives? That night, Melissa seemed strangely quiet to Richard. "Come on, honey. What's the matter with my baby. Liven up," Richard complained. Melissa tried, but she was a drag.

"Here," Richard finally said, "try this. It'll pep you up."

"What is it?"

"Just a little pep pill when you've got the downs."

"No," Melissa said.

"Come on. It won't hurt. I hate to see you in the dumps. Besides, you drag me down too. Come on. Just one."

"No."

"Okay. I might as well be going then. No use sitting here and both of us being bored."

"No, wait," Melissa thought of her mother's and father's disapproval if she should lose Richard and the long dull evenings of being alone again flashed before her eyes. "I'll take it. Just one—just this once." After all, what did it matter?

"Now you're talking, baby."

After a while, pills began to be a part of Melissa's life. She sensed the danger, but when she tried talking to her mother or father, they'd keep praising her for having made "the catch" of the school. She had even approached Suzette for advice, but she had her own problems with her boyfriend. "Don't be so picayunish," she advised. "Relax and enjoy it."

Melissa felt desperately the need to confide in someone but all her old school friends had dropped her because they were jealous of her and Richard, her mother had said.

Richard was beginning to be less and less thoughtful and considerate of her, saying what a drag she was when she was not vivacious and gay. He began flirting openly with all the other girls. Melissa did not dare tell her mother of the times he had left her at parties to be brought home by some one else.

On the night of the junior country club dance, Melissa almost had to coerce Richard to take her. He was moody all night and did not dance with her.

Afterward, at Richard's parents' home, the in-crowd threw a blast. It was a party to end all parties. Everyone was high. The band had come after the dance at the country club to play at the party. The music was loud and blarey. No one noticed the sounds of sirens converging until the police broke onto the patio.

Melissa stood alone in the center of the garden sobbing. She crouched down as she had years ago under the table with the television going full blast.

"Mama," she cried. "Mama."

At the trial, Liz berated the judge as he sentenced her daughter along with the others.

"You've just ruined my daughter's life," she audibly whispered.

"No," the judge sadly shook his head, "no, I couldn't have. You beat me to it."



